

# Concord-Alewife Planning Study

## Meeting Notes: February 12, 2003 Committee Meeting

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**Committee:** Patricia Amoroso, Doug Brugge, Margaret Callahan, Hom Sack, Ann Tennis, Arben Arapi, Nigoghos Atinizian, Joseph Barrell, Pat Goddard, C J Mabardy, Lindsay (Peter) White, Albert Wilson, Jr.

**Staff:** Beth Rubenstein, Susan Glazer, Stuart Dash, Iram Farooq, Taha Jennings, Susanne Rasmussen, Catherine Woodbury

**Consultants:** David Dixon, Ron Mallis, Herb Nolan, Liz Langley, David Black, Terry Szold

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### Welcome & Introductions

Beth Rubenstein, Assistant City Manager for Community Development, welcomed everyone to the meeting on behalf of City Manager Robert Healy. She expressed appreciation for everyone's willingness to work with the City over the next year to plan a vision and a reality for this important neighborhood. Susan Glazer welcomed the Committee and noted the following about this planning process:

- The purpose of the planning process: to develop a vision and an implementable plan, which will be presented to the City Manager.
- The plan would address aspects such as transportation, land use, and open space, and would develop some implementation strategies.
- It will be a two-phase study: Phase 1 will examine existing conditions and develop a preliminary plan, ending around August. Phase 2 will develop the final plan, ending in the winter.

Committee members, City staff, and Consultant team members introduced themselves. Susan Glazer pointed out that the Committee members represented the diverse interests in the study area residents, businesses, property owners, and institutional.

David Dixon, consultant team leader, pointed out that a key element of the process would be what we learn from each other. Some past recommendations for the area had not reached fruition. In order to make the results of this study more likely to succeed, he highlighted the following, based on discussion at the meeting, and on his past planning experience:

- It is important for the group to have direct dialogue, or it will be a much slower, cumbersome process. "Without prejudice" – the ability to say something and know that it won't be used against you five minutes later.
- The tremendous diversity of values makes Cambridge a great place and a good planning effort must find a way to take everyone's interests into account.
- In the process of achieving consensus, it helps to recognize that benefits can come out of making some compromises. It is helpful to think about not asking for too much of one thing, but recognizing that a bit of everything can be achieved with some give and take.
- Good to see the Committee members' optimism and commitment to the study area. The area holds opportunities for growth and change. The members have a wonderful opportunity to guide that change. This project will focus on developing a long term vision, but will also address existing issues, to make the area a better place to live and work in both the short and long term.
- It's important to develop an achievable vision -- something that Committee members can bring to their neighborhood constituencies, to build support so that the plan gets implemented and achieved in the end.

## **Discussion**

### **Quadrangle**

- The railway tracks adjacent to the Fresh Pond Shopping Center may be available in the near future. Should this parcel be included in the study?

### **Transportation**

- The parking lot at Alewife station was designed to take more two more levels of parking, with access already designed.
- The Highlands Resident Council is opposed to opening Loomis Street to the Quadrangle.

### **Environmental**

- Has any of the property been tested for environmental concerns? Is there a list of state listed brownfields sites?  
Most of the study area is in private ownership. Environmental testing typically occurs when a property owner is ready to develop. The issue of whether a contaminated site is usually a function of the amount a developer is willing to spend on cleanup. It is important not to exclude sites since in other parts of Cambridge some developers have chosen to make the investment in clean-up if the potential of the proposed development allows it.

### **Process**

- How will the broader community be involved in this process?  
Committee meetings are open to the public and are listed on the Community Development Department website. In addition, there will be a series of public meetings that will be more broadly publicized and there will be a newsletter periodically through the process.
- How will concerns emanating from other constituencies – Belmont, the State – get addressed?  
Yes, implementation of vision may require cooperation from other constituencies, too.

## **Mental Mapping Exercise**

To begin the mental mapping exercise, Ron Mallis from Goody Clancy & Associates noted that evaluating the present is important before proceeding to the future. He asked everyone to draw a map of the things that come to mind of when they think of the area. Key Committee comments that emerged are as follows:

### **Urban Design**

- Need a heart for the area. A gathering place – Shopping Center? Within the Quadrangle? Open space?
- The study area as a gateway into Cambridge.
- Quadrangle is not very inviting.
- It feels like there aren't many streets and sidewalks in the Quadrangle. Smith Place needs to be widened. Could act as a gateway off of Concord Avenue into commercial development that would be there.
- Shopping center is more of a destination in recent years with newer stores though still not pleasing to look at. Could be spruced up and made more user friendly.

### **Character of Concord Avenue**

- Concord Ave area – currently the park is nice, could become a bit more of a green corridor, modest size buildings, some residential. McDonalds a bit of an eyesore.
- Would like to see lower buildings along Concord Avenue with taller development possible within the Quadrangle.
- Concord Ave could have a boulevard-like character. Rotary improvements could be continued all the way down to Blanchard. The Parkway Overlay District already regulates the character of new development along Concord Ave. Some of the impacts are evident in the new buildings. Huron Village was cited as an example of what could happen along Concord Avenue.

### Open Space

- Need some green somewhere within the Quadrangle.
- The green areas should be connected. Resources are wonderful, would like to see people taking advantage of them. There needs to be a way to link the beads of green (Alewife, golf course)– maybe this link could be a sort of buffer between residents and businesses in the Quadrangle.
- Tie Blair Pond to Highlands and Rafferty Park.
- Golf course open to see in.
- Fresh Pond and Blair Pond are very important.
- Need to preserve Alewife as a wetland but important to provide access to some of the open space areas that are dedicated solely to wildlife .Use the parks intelligently.

### Transportation

- A vehicular connection between Concord Ave and Route 2 would create traffic problems such as people cutting through from Route 2.
- Is it possible to move the Concord Ave bike path to the other side? Currently there is a conflict with the bus stopping.
- Would like to see one lane at the rotary, two lanes seem dangerous
- Lights at the rotary would be one suggestion. Not very user-friendly for automobiles. Susanne Rasmussen pointed out that new lights at the rotary will be operational soon to help make safer crossings to the shopping center and Fresh Pond.
- Smith Place is a dangerous intersection. Consider creating an additional street.
- Concern about Blanchard Road traffic problems. Could use some traffic calming. Jams at peak hours. Problems with buses and trucks. Problem comes from Route 2 and 16 – and the gridlock at the intersection of those two roadways. Many use Blanchard because it's faster than Route 16. It's a narrow road that is not meant to be a highway, though it's used that way.
- Light at Blanchard – sequence changes is much safer now, red on rights might help to move some of the traffic along.
- Avoid traffic by going out at non-peak hours.
- Tend to avoid queuing up for the light on Concord Avenue by going south of Fresh Pond to get to Harvard Square.
- Is it possible to have a pedestrian crossing over the circle? Many people remarked that the infrastructure makes it difficult, and pedestrians don't really like using ramps and steps and bridges, it's often just easier to make the dangerous crossing. There are some examples of places where a pedestrian bridge was incorporated into a larger physical structure – a building – that can encapsulate an elevator for accessibility.
- Roadways will be a key for making development happen in the future. Need to be able to get cars into the business community there.

### Connections

- Would like to see things better connected, particularly pedestrian and bike connections:
  - To Alewife station. Back way from Blanchard to Alewife (20 minute walk, pick up at the railroad, though one must shimmy through a fence).
  - Shopping center has certain businesses that are useful to residents, but the walk is a little farther than desirable. 15 minutes walk.
  - Across Concord Ave.
  - Between Highlands and the Quadrangle.
  - Between Quadrangle and the Triangle.
  - Between Triangle and Fresh Pond. It is easier now to walk along Fresh Pond Pkwy, but Concord Ave is still a barrier.
  - Difficult to get to the recreational areas – Alewife and Danehy – and residential areas. Industrial areas also a barrier. Between 5 pm – 5 am, very inhospitable, feels dangerous.

- A road from the cul-de-sac, connecting to a T stop, connecting to Smith Place – could take a lot of cars off the road.
- Like the existing bike connections -- the bicycle path linking to Boston. Access to Minuteman trail is used quite a lot.

### Land Use

- Light industry in the Quadrangle unlikely to be dramatically different in the future.
- The Quadrangle needs better access, more residential look and feel.
- In the future, when the railway line behind the shopping center ceases operation, that land could be used to make the area better.
- Residential character of Highlands should be extended to include a few adjacent properties. May be some environmental issues, but would like to see that addressed.
- Would like the Quadrangle to be a place where more of people's needs are satisfied so they don't have to drive in and out numerous times during the day.
- Concerned that the area is so underdeveloped.
- Closer to the railroad tracks, all industrial buildings. Low, some with active uses, some inactive. For Cambridge, the area is inexpensive to operate.
- Facilities such as library not present in the neighborhood, so use Belmont. The notion of being a resident of two towns. Use many Belmont facilities. Would wish for closer walking access to facilities.
- It is a neighborhood that interacts with businesses. If we keep it in that perspective, that'll be good.
- Other
- It is possible that future development could include more residential development, along the lines of New Urbanism thinking, could be an option. Something that incorporates low traffic-generating development.
- Many opportunities in this site. Recognize that it is a place that someone would definitely want to live.
- A nice feature to have medical professionals in the area too.
- A walking tour was suggested for the Spring. CDD will coordinate.

In summary, David Dixon noted that

- Amazing that there are still a lot of question marks in people's heads about areas they are unfamiliar with.
- Noticed also that everyone spoke with pride and affection for the place.

### **Second Exercise**

David Dixon asked committee members to list 2 to 5 things that they would like to have in the Study Area. The list included:

### Urban Design

- Need a gathering place for the community that is welcoming and provides space for kids
- Friendly shopping mall (Porter Square is good example) -- more animated with coffee shops and places to sit and spend time; better stores, though it has already come a long way; affordable food store; some place for people to gather and meet that really creates a sense of neighborhood.
- High quality of development in the Quadrangle. Wider streets, sidewalks, green space, restaurant development that encourages the area to stay in the area, making it more attractive
- Identity for the Quadrangle, a sense of place there
- Walkability in the Quadrangle --- restaurants before but not enough market to support them. Seems a bit like Landsdown Street area.

### Character of Concord Avenue

- Development on Concord Ave that is more of a destination (eat, shop).

### Open Space

- Better connections among all green space areas,
- Opportunities for green space within the Quadrangle.
- Blair Pond should be more useable. MDC is working on connecting Blair Pond with the neighborhood.
- Green space links between all the green space system.

### Transportation

- Connection between Smith Place and Cambridgepark Drive,
- A commuter rail stop
- A road from the Quadrangle into the shopping center under the bridge.
- Traffic calming for Blanchard Road.

### Connections

- Access to Fresh Pond area
- Alewife Reservation should be easily reachable on foot.
- Safe connection to Fresh Pond.
- Link between Triangle and Quadrangle
- Better pedestrian connections between Concord and Alewife.
- Connection of the triangle to the Quadrangle might reduce a lot of heavy trucks on Concord Avenue.

### Land Use

- More residential areas
- Need appropriate transition between residential and commercial/industrial areas.
- Increase around the clock activity on Concord Avenue – slow down the speed of traffic. More mixed uses there.

### Other

- Enhanced quality of life.
- “Think small, personal, and interactive.”
- Need better infrastructure from Burger King to Smith Place. Property owners probably need help from city to develop that area.
- A public library.
- Would like to see City departments work together to better serve the area.

To summarize, David Dixon noticed an overriding theme of community, community, community and creating places that enrich life and tie it all together.

### Next Steps

The next meeting would be March 12.

The public meeting will be later in March.

CDD will confirm the location for March 12 and details of the public meeting.